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# LAST POEMS

OF

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

First edition



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THIS little volume contains those of the poems which Mr. Lowell wrote in his last years which, I believe, he might have wished to preserve. Three of them were published before his death. Of the rest, two appear here for the first time.

C. E. N.

*September, 1895.*



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## LAST POEMS

### HOW I CONSULTED THE ORACLE OF THE GOLDFISHES

WHAT know we of the world immense

Beyond the narrow ring of sense?  
What should we know, who lounge about  
The house we dwell in, nor find out,  
Masked by a wall, the secret cell  
Where the soul's priests in hiding dwell?  
The winding stair that steals aloof  
To chapel-mysteries 'neath the roof?

It lies about us, yet as far  
From sense sequestered as a star  
New launched its wake of fire to trace  
In secrecies of unprobed space,  
Whose beacon's lightning-pinioned spears





### The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

Might earthward haste a thousand years  
Nor reach it. So remote seems this  
World undiscovered, yet it is  
A neighbor near and dumb as death,  
So near, we seem to feel the breath  
Of its hushed habitants as they  
Pass us unchallenged, night and day.

Never could mortal ear nor eye  
By sound or sign suspect them nigh,  
Yet why may not some subtler sense  
Than those poor two give evidence ?  
Transfuse the ferment of their being  
Into our own, past hearing, seeing,  
As men, if once attempered so,  
Far off each other's thought can know ?  
As horses with an instant thrill  
Measure their rider's strength of will ?  
Comes not to all some glimpse that brings  
Strange sense of sense-escaping things ?  
Wraiths some transfigured nerve divines ?



## The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

Approaches, premonitions, signs,  
Voices of Ariel that die out  
In the dim No Man's Land of Doubt?

Are these Night's dusky birds? Are these  
Phantasmas of the silences  
Outer or inner? — rude heirlooms  
From grovellers in the cavern-glooms,  
Who in unhuman Nature saw  
Misshapen foes with tusk and claw,  
And with those night-fears brute and blind  
Peopled the chaos of their mind,  
Which, in ungovernable hours,  
Still make their bestial lair in ours?

Were they, or were they not? Yes; no;  
Uncalled they come, unbid they go,  
And leave us fumbling in a doubt  
Whether within us or without  
The spell of this illusion be  
That witches us to hear and see



## The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

As in a twi-life what it will,  
And hath such wonder-working skill  
That what we deemed most solid-wrought  
Turns a mere figment of our thought,  
Which when we grasp at in despair  
Our fingers find vain semblance there,  
For Psyche seeks a corner-stone  
Firmer than aught to matter known.

Is it illusion? Dream-stuff? Show  
Made of the wish to have it so?  
'T were something, even though this were  
all :

So the poor prisoner, on his wall  
Long gazing, from the chance designs  
Of crack, mould, weather-stain, refines  
New and new pictures without cease,  
Landscape, or saint, or altar-piece :  
But these are Fancy's common brood  
Hatched in the nest of solitude ;  
This is Dame Wish's hourly trade,



## The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

By our rude sires a goddess made.  
Could longing, though its heart broke,  
give

Trances in which we chiefly live?  
Moments that darken all beside,  
Tearfully radiant as a bride?  
Beckonings of bright escape, of wings  
Purchased with loss of baser things?  
Blithe trauancies from all control  
Of Hylë, outings of the soul?

The worm, by trustful instinct led,  
Draws from its womb a slender thread,  
And drops, confiding that the breeze  
Will waft it to unpastured trees :  
So the brain spins itself, and so  
Swings boldly off in hope to blow  
Across some tree of knowledge, fair  
With fruitage new, none else shall share :  
Sated with wavering in the Void,  
It backward climbs, so best employed,





## The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

And, where no proof is nor can be,  
Seeks refuge with Analogy ;  
Truth's soft half-sister, she may tell  
Where lurks, seld-sought, the other's  
well.

With metaphysic midges sore,  
My Thought seeks comfort at her door,  
And, at her feet a suppliant cast,  
Evokes a spectre of the past.  
Not such as shook the knees of Saul,  
But winsome, golden-gay withal, —  
Two fishes in a globe of glass,  
That pass, and waver, and re-pass,  
And lighten that way, and then this,  
Silent as meditation is.

With a half-humorous smile I see  
In this their aimless industry,  
These errands nowhere and returns  
Grave as a pair of funeral urns,  
This ever-seek and never-find,  
A mocking image of my mind.



### The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

But not for this I bade you climb  
Up from the darkening deeps of time :  
Help me to tame these wild day-mares  
That sudden on me unawares.  
Fish, do your duty, as did they  
Of the Black Island far away  
In life's safe places, — far as you  
From all that now I see or do.  
You come, embodied flames, as when  
I knew you first, nor yet knew men ;  
Your gold renews my golden days,  
Your splendor all my loss repays.

'Tis more than sixty years ago  
Since first I watched your to-and-fro ;  
Two generations come and gone  
From silence to oblivion,  
With all their noisy strife and stress  
Lulled in the grave's forgivingness,  
While you unquenchably survive  
Immortal, almost more alive.



### The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

I watched you then a curious boy,  
Who in your beauty found full joy,  
And, by no problem-debts distressed,  
Sate at life's board a welcome guest.  
You were my sister's pets, not mine ;  
But Property's dividing line  
No hint of dispossession drew  
On any map my simplese knew ;  
O golden age, not yet dethroned !  
What made me happy, that I owned ;  
You were my wonders, you my Lars,  
In darkling days my sun and stars,  
And over you entranced I hung,  
Too young to know that I was young.  
Gazing with still unsated bliss,  
My fancies took some shape like this :  
" I have my world, and so have you,  
A tiny universe for two,  
A bubble by the artist blown,  
Scarcely more fragile than our own,  
Where you have all a whale could wish,



### The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

Happy as Eden's primal fish.  
Manna is dropt you thrice a day  
From some kind heaven not far away,  
And still you snatch its softening crumbs,  
Nor, more than we, think whence it comes.  
No toil seems yours but to explore  
Your cloistered realm from shore to shore ;  
Sometimes you trace its limits round,  
Sometimes its limpid depths you sound,  
Or hover motionless midway,  
Like gold-red clouds at set of day ;  
Erelong you whirl with sudden whim  
Off to your globe's most distant rim,  
Where, greatened by the watery lens,  
Methinks no dragon of the fens  
Flashed huger scales against the sky,  
Roused by Sir Bevis or Sir Guy,  
And the one eye that meets my view,  
Lidless and strangely largening, too,  
Like that of conscience in the dark,  
Seems to make me its single mark.





## The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

What a benignant lot is yours  
That have an own All-out-of-doors,  
No words to spell, no sums to do,  
No Nepos and no parlyvoo !  
How happy you without a thought  
Of such cross things as Must and Ought, —  
I too the happiest of boys  
To see and share your golden joys !”

So thought the child, in simpler words,  
Of you his finny flocks and herds ;  
Now, an old man, I bid you rise  
To the fine sight behind the eyes,  
And, lo, you float and flash again  
In the dark cistern of my brain.  
But o'er your visioned flames I brood  
With other mien, in other mood ;  
You are no longer there to please,  
But to stir argument, and tease  
My thought with all the ghostly shapes  
From which no moody man escapes.



### The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

Diminished creature, I no more  
Find Fairyland beside my door,  
But for each moment's pleasure pay  
With the *quart d'heure* of Rabelais !

I watch you in your crystal sphere,  
And wonder if you see and hear  
Those shapes and sounds that stir the wide  
Conjecture of a world outside ;  
In your pent lives, as we in ours,  
Have you surmises dim of powers,  
Of presences obscurely shown,  
Of lives a riddle to your own,  
Just on the senses' outer verge,  
Where sense-nerves into soul-nerves merge,  
Where we conspire our own deceit  
Confederate in deft Fancy's feat,  
And the fooled brain befools the eyes  
With pageants woven of its own lies ?  
But *are* they lies ? Why more than those  
Phantoms that startle your repose,



### The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

Half seen, half heard, then flit away,  
And leave you your prose-bounded day?

The things ye see as shadows I  
Know to be substance ; tell me why  
My visions, like those haunting you,  
May not be as substantial too.  
Alas, who ever answer heard  
From fish, and dream-fish too? Absurd !  
Your consciousness I half divine,  
But you are wholly deaf to mine.  
Go, I dismiss you ; ye have done  
All that ye could ; our silk is spun :  
Dive back into the deep of dreams,  
Where what is real is what seems !  
Yet I shall fancy till my grave  
Your lives to mine a lesson gave ;  
If lesson none, an image, then,  
Impeaching self-conceit in men  
Who put their confidence alone  
In what they call the Seen and Known.



### The Oracle of the Goldfishes

---

How seen? How known? As through  
your glass

Our wavering apparitions pass  
Perplexingly, then subtly wrought  
To some quite other thing by thought.  
Here shall my resolution be :  
The shadow of the mystery  
Is haply wholesomer for eyes  
That cheat us to be otherwise,  
And I am happy in my right  
To love God's darkness as His light.

10th May, 1889.





## TURNER'S OLD TÉMÉRAIRE

UNDER A FIGURE SYMBOLIZING THE CHURCH

**T**HOU wast the fairest of all man-  
made things ;  
The breath of heaven bore up thy cloudy  
wings,  
And, patient in their triple rank,  
The thunders crouched about thy flank,  
Their black lips silent with the doom of  
kings.

The storm-wind loved to rock him in thy  
pines,  
And swell thy vans with breath of great  
designs ;  
Long-wildered pilgrims of the main  
By thee relaid their course again,  
Whose prow was guided by celestial signs.



### Turner's Old Téméraire

---

How didst thou trample on tumultuous  
    seas,  
Or, like some basking sea-beast stretched  
    at ease,  
Let the bull-fronted surges glide  
Caressingly along thy side,  
Like glad hounds leaping by the hunts-  
    man's knees !

Heroic feet, with fire of genius shod,  
In battle's ecstasy thy deck have trod,  
While from their touch a fulgor ran  
Through plank and spar, from man to man,  
Welding thee to a thunderbolt of God.

Now a black demon, belching fire and  
    steam,  
Drags thee away, a pale, dismantled dream,  
And all thy desecrated bulk  
Must landlocked lie, a helpless hulk,  
To gather weeds in the regardless stream.



### Turner's Old Téméraire

---

Woe's me, from Ocean's sky-horized  
air

To this! Better, the flame-cross still  
afflare,

Shot-shattered to have met thy doom  
Where thy last lightnings cheered the  
gloom,

Than here be safe in dangerless despair.

Thy drooping symbol to the flagstaff  
clings,

Thy rudder soothes the tide to lazy rings,

Thy thunders now but birthdays greet,

Thy planks forget the martyrs' feet,

Thy masts what challenges the sea-wind  
brings.

Thou a mere hospital, where human  
wrecks,

Like winter-flies, crawl those renowned  
decks,



## Turner's Old Téméraire

---

Ne'er trodden save by captive foes,  
And wonted sternly to impose  
God's will and thine on bowed imperial  
necks !

Shall nevermore, engendered of thy fame,  
A new sea-eagle heir thy conqueror name,  
And with commissioned talons wrench  
From thy supplanter's grimy clench  
His sheath of steel, his wings of smoke  
and flame ?

This shall the pleased eyes of our chil-  
dren see ;  
For this the stars of God long even as we ;  
Earth listens for his wings ; the Fates  
Expectant lean ; Faith cross-propt waits,  
And the tired waves of Thought's insur-  
gent sea.

1888.





## ST. MICHAEL THE WEIGHER

**S**TOOD the tall Archangel weighing  
All man's dreaming, doing, saying,  
All the failure and the pain,  
All the triumph and the gain,  
In the unimagined years,  
Full of hopes, more full of tears,  
Since old Adam's hopeless eyes  
Backward searched for Paradise,  
And, instead, the flame-blade saw  
Of inexorable Law.

Waking, I beheld him there,  
With his fire-gold, flickering hair,  
In his blinding armor stand,  
And the scales were in his hand :  
Mighty were they, and full well



### St. Michael the Weigher

---

They could poise both heaven and hell.  
"Angel," asked I humbly then,  
"Weighest thou the souls of men?  
That thine office is, I know."  
"Nay," he answered me, "not so :  
But I weigh the hope of Man  
Since the power of choice began,  
In the world, of good or ill."  
Then I waited and was still.

In one scale I saw him place  
All the glories of our race,  
Cups that lit Belshazzar's feast,  
Gems, the lightning of the East,  
Kublai's sceptre, Cæsar's sword,  
Many a poet's golden word,  
Many a skill of science, vain  
To make men as gods again.

In the other scale he threw  
Things regardless, outcast, few,



St. Michael the Weigher

---

Martyr-ash, arena sand,  
Of St. Francis' cord a strand,  
Beechen cups of men whose need  
Fasted that the poor might feed,  
Disillusions and despairs  
Of young saints with grief-grayed hairs,  
Broken hearts that brake for Man.

Marvel through my pulses ran  
Seeing then the beam divine  
Swiftly on this hand decline,  
While Earth's splendor and renown  
Mounted light as thistle-down.

1883.



## A VALENTINE

**L**ET others wonder what fair face  
Upon their path shall shine,  
And, fancying half, half hoping, trace  
Some maiden shape of tenderest grace  
To be their Valentine.

Let other hearts with tremor sweet  
One secret wish enshrine  
That Fate may lead their happy feet  
Fair Julia in the lane to meet  
To be their Valentine.

But I, far happier, am secure ;  
I know the eyes benign,  
The face more beautiful and pure  
Than Fancy's fairest portraiture  
That mark my Valentine.





## A Valentine

---

More than when first I singled thee,  
This only prayer is mine, —  
That, in the years I yet shall see,  
As, darling, in the past, thou 'lt be  
My happy Valentine.



AN APRIL BIRTHDAY — AT SEA

ON this wild waste, where never blossom came,

Save the white wind-flower in the billow's cap,

Or those pale disks of momentary flame,

Loose petals dropped from Dian's careless lap,

What far-fetched influence all my fancy fills

With singing birds and dancing daffodils?

Why, 'tis her day whom jocund April brought,



### An April Birthday — At Sea

---

And who brings April with her in her  
eyes ;  
It is her vision lights my lonely thought,  
Even as a rose that opes its hushed surprise  
In sick men's chambers, with its  
glowing breath  
Plants Summer at the glacier edge of  
Death.

Gray sky, sea gray as mossy stones on  
graves ; —  
Anon comes April in her jollity ;  
And dancing down the bleak vales 'tween  
the waves,  
Makes them green glades for all her  
flowers and me.  
The gulls turn thrushes, charmed are  
sea and sky  
By magic of my thought, and know  
not why.



### An April Birthday — At Sea

---

Ah, but I know, for never April's shine,  
Nor passion gust of rain, nor all her  
flowers  
Scattered in haste, were seen so sudden  
fine  
As she in various mood, on whom the  
powers  
Of happiest stars in fair conjunction  
smiled  
To bless the birth of April's darling  
child.





## LOVE AND THOUGHT

**W**HAT hath Love with Thought to  
do ?

Still at variance are the two.  
Love is sudden, Love is rash,  
Love is like the levin flash,  
Comes as swift, as swiftly goes,  
And his mark as surely knows.

Thought is lumpish, Thought is slow,  
Weighing long 'tween yes and no ;  
When dear Love is dead and gone,  
Thought comes creeping in anon,  
And, in his deserted nest,  
Sits to hold the crowner's quest.

Since we love, what need to think ?  
Happiness stands on a brink



### Love and Thought

---

Whence too easy 't is to fall  
Whither 's no return at all ;  
Have a care, half-hearted lover,  
Thought would only push her over !



## THE NOBLER LOVER

**I**F he be a nobler lover, take him !

You in you I seek, and not myself ;  
Love with men 's what women choose to  
make him,

Seraph strong to soar, or fawn-eyed elf :  
All I am or can, your beauty gave it,

Lifting me a moment nigh to you,  
And my bit of heaven, I fain would save  
it —

Mine I thought it was, I never knew.

What you take of me is yours to serve  
you,

All I give, you gave to me before ;  
Let him win you ! If I but deserve you,  
I keep all you grant to him and more :



### The Nobler Lover

---

You shall make me dare what others dare  
not,

You shall keep my nature pure as snow,  
And a light from you that others share  
not

Shall transfigure me where'er I go.

Let me be your thrall ! However lowly  
Be the bondsman's service I can do,  
Loyalty shall make it high and holy ;  
Naught can be unworthy, done for you.

Men shall say, " A lover of this fashion  
Such an icy mistress well beseems."  
Women say, " Could we deserve such pas-  
sion,

We might be the marvel that he dreams."





ON HEARING A SONATA OF  
BEETHOVEN'S PLAYED IN THE  
NEXT ROOM

UNSEEN Musician, thou art sure to  
please,  
For those same notes in happier days I  
heard  
Poured by dear hands that long have  
never stirred  
Yet now again for me delight the keys :  
Ah me, to strong illusions such as these  
What are Life's solid things? The  
walls that gird  
Our senses, lo, a casual scent or word  
Levels, and 't is the soul that hears and  
sees !  
Play on, dear girl, and many be the years



On Hearing a Sonata of Beethoven's

---

Ere some grayhaired survivor sit like  
me  
And, for thy largess pay a meed of tears  
Unto another who, beyond the sea  
Of Time and Change, perhaps not  
sadly hears  
A music in this verse undreamed by  
thee !

CHRISTMAS, 1885.



## VERSES

INTENDED TO GO WITH A POSSET DISH TO MY  
DEAR LITTLE GODDAUGHTER, 1882

**I**N good old times, which means, you  
know,  
The time men wasted long ago,  
And we must blame our brains or mood  
If that we squander seems less good,  
In those blest days when wish was act  
And fancy dreamed itself to fact,  
Godfathers used to fill with guineas  
The cups they gave their pickaninnies,  
Performing functions at the chrism  
Not mentioned in the Catechism.  
No millionaire, poor I fill up  
With wishes my more modest cup,  
Though had I Amalthea's horn



## Verses

---

It should be hers the newly born.  
Nay, shudder not ! I should bestow it  
So brimming full she could n't blow it.  
Wishes are n't horses : true, but still  
There are worse roadsters than goodwill.  
And so I wish my darling health,  
And just to round my couplet, wealth,  
With faith enough to bridge the chasm  
'Twixt Genesis and Protoplasm,  
And bear her o'er life's current vex  
From this world to a better next,  
Where the full glow of God puts out  
Poor reason's farthing candle, Doubt.  
I've wished her healthy, wealthy, wise,  
But since there's room for countless wishes  
In these old-fashioned posset dishes,  
I'll wish her from my plenteous store  
Of those commodities two more,  
Her father's wit, veined through and  
through  
With tenderness that Watts (but whew !





Celia's aflame, I mean no stricture  
On his Sir Josh-surpassing picture)  
I wish her next, and 't is the soul  
Of all I've dropt into the bowl,  
Her mother's beauty — nay, but two  
So fair at once would never do.  
Then let her but the half possess,  
Troy was besieged ten years for less.  
Now if there's any truth in Darwin,  
And we from what was, all we are win,  
I simply wish the child to be  
A sample of Heredity,  
Enjoying to the full extent  
Life's best, the Unearned Increment  
Which Fate her Godfather to flout  
Gave *him* in legacies of gout.  
Thus, then, the cup is duly filled ;  
Walk steady, dear, lest all be spilled.



ON A BUST OF GENERAL GRANT

STRONG, simple, silent are the [stead-  
fast] laws

That sway this universe, of none withstood,  
Unconscious of man's outcries or applause,  
Or what man deems his evil or his good ;  
And when the Fates ally them with a cause  
That wallows in the sea-trough and seems  
lost,

Drifting in danger of the reefs and sands  
Of shallow counsels, this way, that way,  
tost,

Strength, silence, simpleness, of these  
three strands

They twist the cable shall the world hold  
fast



### On a Bust of General Grant

---

To where its anchors clutch the bed-rock  
of the Past.

Strong, simple, silent, therefore such was  
he

Who helped us in our need; the eternal  
law

That who can saddle Opportunity  
Is God's elect, though many a mortal flaw  
May minish him in eyes that closely see,  
Was verified in him: what need we say  
Of one who made success where others  
failed,

Who, with no light save that of common  
day,

Struck hard, and still struck on till Fortune  
quailed,

But that (so sift the Norns) a desperate  
van

Ne'er fell at last to one who was not wholly  
man.



### On a Bust of General Grant

---

A face all prose where Time's [benignant]  
haze

Softens no raw edge yet, nor makes all  
fair

With the beguiling light of vanished days ;  
This is relentless granite, bleak and bare,  
Roughhewn, and scornful of æsthetic  
phrase ;

Nothing is here for fancy, naught for  
dreams,

The Present's hard uncompromising light  
Accents all vulgar outlines, flaws, and  
seams,

Yet vindicates some pristine natural right  
O'ertopping that hereditary grace

Which marks the gain or loss of some  
time-fondled race.

So Marius looked, methinks, and Crom-  
well so,

Not in the purple born, to those they led





### On a Bust of General Grant

---

Nearer for that and costlier to the foe,  
New moulders of old forms, by nature  
bred

The exhaustless life of manhood's seeds  
to show,

Let but the ploughshare of portentous  
times

Strike deep enough to reach them where  
they lie :

Despair and danger are their fostering  
climes,

And their best sun bursts from a stormy  
sky :

He was our man of men, nor would abate  
The utmost due manhood could claim of  
fate.

Nothing ideal, a plain-people's man  
At the first glance, a more deliberate ken  
Finds type primeval, theirs in whose veins  
ran



### On a Bust of General Grant

---

Such blood as quelled the dragon in his  
den,

Made harmless fields, and better worlds  
began :

He came grim-silent, saw and did the deed  
That was to do ; in his master-grip

Our sword flashed joy ; no skill of words  
could breed

Such sure conviction as that close-clamped  
lip ;

He slew our dragon, nor, so seemed it,  
knew

He had done more than any simplest man  
might do.

Yet did this man, war-tempered, stern as  
steel

Where steel opposed, prove soft in civil  
sway ;

The hand hilt-hardened had lost tact to  
feel



### On a Bust of General Grant

---

The world's base coin, and glozing knaves  
made prey  
Of him and of the entrusted Commonweal;  
So Truth insists and will not be denied.  
We turn our eyes away, and so will Fame,  
As if in his last battle he had died  
Victor for us and spotless of all blame,  
Doer of hopeless tasks which praters shirk,  
One of those still plain men that do the  
world's rough work.

NOTE. — This poem is the last, so far as is known, written by Mr. Lowell. He laid it aside for revision, leaving two of the verses incomplete.

In a pencilled fragment of the poem the first verse appears as follows : —

“ Strong, simple, silent, such are Nature's Laws.”

In the final copy, from which the poem is now printed, the verse originally stood : —

“ Strong, steadfast, silent are the laws,”  
but “steadfast” is crossed out, and “simple” written above.



## On a Bust of General Grant

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A similar change is made in the ninth verse of the stanza, where "simpleness" is substituted for "steadfastness."

The change from "steadfast" to "simple" was not made, probably through oversight, in the first verse of the second stanza.

There is nothing to indicate what epithet Mr. Lowell would have chosen to complete the first verse of the third stanza.

C. E. N.













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